

The Historic New Orleans Collection

Mignon Faget

June 14, 2010

Mark Cave,
Interviewer

Q: This is Mark Cave. It's June 14, 2010. I'm with Mignon Faget and we're at the Williams Research Center at 410 Chartres Street, and we're continuing our interview about your life.

We've discussed this in the earlier interviews a little bit, but how did you decide to become a jewelry maker? How did you decide that this was going to be your life?

Faget: Well, it wasn't exactly a plan that I had. It was simply an idea that I got, "Why not try this?" I think that people look at careers now with business plans, and that was the last thing on my mind. I had no—really, I was searching for a way to find a method to express myself as an artist, and I was not leaning toward—I didn't know where I was going, so I had tried different things, and doing textile designs was one of them.

I worked with Sue Gussow. She was a friend of mine, she was from New York, she was an established artist, had gotten her master's at Newcomb College under James Steg, and she was teaching at Dominican College, which no longer exists. She was also living in a house that belonged to Angela Gregory. She had one apartment in Angela's house.

So I would take drawing courses just to keep my hand in things. I'd been married, maybe about eight years, and I was tired of doing lady volunteer work, and I needed a direction, and so I was trying to find it through taking classes, and I took a class with her. I think I did relate this,

but I'll just say it again. She was a big influence on me because she had a strong sense of fashion. Her drawings often involved her models in hats, and she had a flair for that kind of thing.

When I had been at Newcomb, such things were not considered worthy of being considered fine art or whatever; it was very ivory tower. So Sue was kind of a soulmate in a way, because she understood the niche of my talent going into—I had a great sense of style, I was finished with my house, and what do I do now? So I started taking classes.

The blocks I made, wood blocks and linoleum blocks, were interesting, but I had a drive to create something that had a purpose beyond what it was, if you can say that. I wasn't thinking of an enterprise, but I was thinking of an application of the design to textiles, which would then become original clothing designs.

So she had encourage me when she saw one of my blocks, and said, "You know, you really have a good eye for design. You should pursue that." And I did. She was very supportive, and later when I went to Parsons in the summer of '69—well, actually, wait. What was the name of the chairman of the art department at Newcomb?

Q: Not Robin Feild?

Faget: No, no, later. His father had been the headmaster at Country Day. Judith knows.

Norman Boothby. He was the chairman and he was kind of unusual in the sense that he had been the director of the Chicago Art Institute and so he had a more democratic approach. He was the one that helped me get into Parsons in the summer program because he was acquainted with the

director and he respected what I was trying to do. Maybe he understood it better than I did at the time. [laughs]

So I did have some encouragement, and then in that summer that I went, it was only like about a two-month period, I left my two children with their father. We were still married. When I think about it now, it seems utterly wild, but it seemed like a good idea. [laughs] I took my daughter, who was nine, but the boys were like seven and ten.

So I was very driven, didn't know where I was going, but I was driven. Things evolved slowly, but when I look back, really in a two-year period or less than that, I was already set up with a workshop, but it was simply from the point of view of trying to do something I wanted to do. And I was showing them to people in several boutiques in Texas and here, you know, gave me orders in the summer I was in New York. That was the early days of boutique, and Third Avenue had a lot of boutiques and I would just carry my things into these little stores and I wrote a stack of orders. Then it dawned on me that I had to make them and I didn't have a factory. [laughs]

I was really pretty ill-equipped to do what I did, but I think because my mother was so enterprising with figuring out the way to do things, I had that ability but I didn't know I had it. I always seemed like I was groping in a dark room, but I managed to go through several phases of—at one point I had a contract with a New York manufacturer that I'd met through someone I met that summer. You know, I was eager to meet people that could help me find a direction.

I think my idea then was to work with someone in New York. So I did that for about six months, but it wasn't practical. This man sent down sewing machines. Meanwhile, my marriage broke up suddenly—well, not too suddenly, but rather abruptly. I moved my bedroom to the dining room on the first floor of the two-story house I lived in, and my bedroom was a sample

room. This man was covering my wages for the people—I had two women, sample hands working.

It was like, I remember in New York—remember this was '69, SoHo was a warehouse district with artists that were living in some of the closed-down warehouse floors, but it wasn't what it is today by any means. It was just a cheap place to live and get a lot of space.

Sue Gussow had found a loft that she purchased. In those early years, I would walk through the streets of SoHo and there were a few people that were doing this combination of artist and designer and they had several women, like, in a back room, sewing, and they had a front room where you could go in. And that's within my mind, and so when the arrangement with the New York man—his name is Lucien Padawa—when that did not really take hold because it was very, very impractical, he even had me designing a fur collection, which I did not know what I was doing, but I was trying. I have a lot of stories about that experience, but anyway. [laughs]

So I finally settled down. I managed to make the orders that I had written in New York, and then I knew that I needed a space to work, and I found a little river shack, is what it was, right off the river Uptown on Dublin Street. I did it over with a lot of help from Franklin, from Jean, and renovated the cottage, but really just kind of cleaned it up and added some electricity.

I was still making clothes at that time, and at that time, I thought, “Ah, I think I'll try my hand in accessorizing these creations.” So I made my first jewelry. Someone named Jim Kelly [phonetic] was teaching at Newcomb in the art department, and he cast my first pieces. Then I set up a workshop in the shed in my yard, in my backyard, and that's where the jewelry was cast, outside, but it was finished and worked in this little workshop. That lasted a couple of three years, I think. Okay, so it was a place to work. I really didn't think of it as—

Q: We didn't talk about your casting operation in the earlier interviews. Describe that in more detail.

Faget: Well, the casting operation was—in the early days, the first pieces were cast by Jim Kelly and he had a centrifugal casting drum and he did the casting for me. The work that was done in prep, he helped me with the waxes and—so the first casting, do you mean to describe the casting technique?

Q: Yes, early on when you—

Faget: Early on. Well, every summer I had gone to this one place in Alabama. It's on Perdido Bay, away from the big beach, but on the back side, these beautiful old country houses that I rented, and my children and I would go there every summer for several years, and I had a large shell collection.

So the idea was experimental. The idea was to see what would happen if these objects, these shells, were transformed into silver and what it would look like, how would it adapt to something to wear as art to wear. So I worked with several forms in the beginning. What I would do is make a mold off of the shell and then pull a wax from the mold and then it would be invested—and Jim Kelly did that part—it would be invested with a mold made of plaster with silicon in it, and reinforced and then cut apart and that became the mold for the production waxes. But the first castings were just like one-up, because I was experimenting. So in that mold, that investment mold, it's strapped onto the casting drum and the silver is melted in a

crucible and it's put into the casting. I can't remember what that's called now. I can't remember the name of the container that the silver is put into. Then it's spun. In the cast, the silver actually gets shot into the mold by centrifugal force. Then you break up in the mold and you have an original casting.

So from that point, I would take it back and modify it, modify the weight, modify it in terms of how to make it into something that could be worn as a piece of jewelry. They were very simple sculptural things.

I was just wondering, Mark, if the sessions might, some of them, as we talk about jewelry, might take place where you could actually see some of the things.

Q: Okay. I was going to ask you about how you began to market your product once you developed your clothing line and then your early jewelry.

Faget: Well, as I marketed my product, I did it myself by calling on stores, and the clothing was, of course, the first attempt. This was early boutique day, and D.H. Holmes, which was a large store in New Orleans, had opened a boutique that was not part of the regular dress department or junior dress department. I'm trying to remember the name of it. I can't remember. But the buyer for that department, it was a little boutique, it was sort of roped off or built at the head of the escalator, and she loved what I was doing, because it was very new and very creative, and I think D.H. Holmes, being a locally owned company, was interested in the fact that I was a native New Orleanian. So they did promotions, big ads in the paper, and personal appearances of the clothing and the jewelry, as well.

And then there was another store on St. Charles Avenue that loved the work, and it was actually through their buyer, who was Louise Reese-Brogues [phonetic], who was also a Newcomb woman. Louise and I have been friends for a long time, and she, I think, was the first person I showed anything to and she said, “This is great.”

I had that kind of encouragement from people I knew, and, of course, Franklin, Jean Seidenberg, and there was another guy, Jim Whitmore [phonetic] who were very supportive. So it was kind of part of my friend group, and extending into people in the city that had commercial enterprises, so that was my—I sold to them to sell, but then I also had things in the workshop.

Actually, it was not meant to be a retail shop. It wasn't meant to be open to the public, but people would come in because Tim Trapolin, who was also a good friend—you know, these were the days in the early seventies where folk music and we sort of had a clan of friends and artists. They were all artists or photographers and musicians that hung out together, and I was in that group of people, and they were all very helpful to me and interested because I was doing this different thing.

So one day, Walda Besthoff, Sydney Besthoff's wife, walked in with Judith Holton, who was someone who was a model at the time. She had modeled my clothing. That was in an article in *New Orleans Magazine*.

I'm sort of getting the time mixed up. But George Bacon was the editor of *New Orleans Magazine*. Jean thought that what I was doing was so unique and interesting that *New Orleans Magazine* might be interested. And they were and they did a cover story of my work.

Jean and I went down to the French Quarter, and at that time, this was like in '68, '69, so it was right before I went to Parsons, Decatur Street was very raunchy and with kind of seamen's bars. We found a motorcycle clan called the Galloping Goose, and it was Jean's idea to use them

in the article. He did the shoot and so we hired them, and we did a shoot in Audubon Park using Judith Holton, Lady Reese [phonetic], and another girl named Cheryl [phonetic], but I can't remember her last name. And Jean did these beautiful photographs of the contrast of these very kind of grungy-looking guys with long hair and beards and their motorcycles, the Galloping Goose, and the clothing was very kind of bare on the top. They were vests, but that was sort of the era of wearing no bra and see-through blouses and sort of clothing like that, kind of very revealing. but it was a fine line, you know. I think I walked the line very well because they were always very pretty and very discreet, but they were a little bit like today, but, you know, showing a lot of skin.

And these were outfits that were—I think Jean got the idea because the idea, they were vests. Vests were very big. This is, you know, the day of the hippie and long hair, and vests were fringe and that kind of thing. So I incorporated all of these iconography, kind of iconic ideas that were popular during this late sixties and seventies of the kind of freestyle living that was going on then.

If you can imagine these beautiful silk art handkerchief linen vests with nailheads. They were not heavy, ugly nailheads; they were these beautiful little mirrored flat nailheads that I made, not just a border, but whole panels of designs made out of them. It's like using the idea of a beading design, but fabricating it in something tough with the nailhead, and they were exciting, I'd have to say. They were very exciting things, and the photographs of the contrast between the bikers and the beautiful models with these clothes on. And these men behaved themselves so beautifully.

Q: Was it fun?

Faget: It was lots of fun, but they behaved themselves. I'm sure they were having a good time.

Q: What was Jean's story? What was his last name?

Faget: Seidenberg.

Q: And was he a photographer?

Faget: Well, no, he's a painter, a sculptor, and a photographer. He's a very multimedia person.

Q: And how did you know him?

Faget: I first met him when I was a student. He was a friend of Alfred Moir, who was my art history teacher, and they were buddies. Actually, I was looking for some mosaics for a piece in my senior thesis and Alfred Moir said, "Oh, you have to go down and see Jean Seidenberg. He's doing a mosaic for a motel." It was called Motel de Ville. He was making a big mural for the bar in the hotel, based on Mardi Gras, if I remember correctly.

Anyway, so he had a studio on Front Street right by the river, sort of where the Aquarium is, right in that area, and it was very impressive. I'd never been to a real artist's studio. The only artists that I had known were teaching at Newcomb. So Jean was impressive. And then he liked me and he used to photograph me, because he was trying to develop a market for his photographs. He had a beautiful old camera with this great lens. I can't remember what they're

called. Do you know the old cameras that you put the hood on? He took a lot of pictures of me, even before I went to Europe, so this was in 1955, '56, when I first met him. We became friends, very good friends. [laughs] That was part of the break-up of my marriage, so I don't know how much reality here that you want. [laughter]

Q: Did you remain friends for a long time?

Faget: Yes, a very long time. [laughs] He was very encouraging and helpful to me, like the idea he had. He was from New York and he had this kind of marketing kind of approach. He helped me do ads and catalogs in the beginning, although my first catalog was designed by Tom Varisco. I don't remember how I met Tom, but what I was doing was so unique in the city. I mean, there were people who designed Mardi Gras ball costumes and that kind of thing, but there was no one doing sort of edgy fashion. So people who were graphic designers were interested in what I was doing. So it was a creative environment for me.

Q: Who was Franklin? What was his last name?

Faget: Adams.

Q: Franklin Adams. What was his story?

Faget: Well, Franklin was married to one of my best friends and he had just come here from Florida—he's from Florida—to teach at Newcomb College. He taught drawing and painting.

He had married my friend Cynthia Carso, so we became very good friends. That was around 195—I think we go way back to right around the time that I had my first child, 1959. So we were friends. He was part of this group I'm talking about.

Q: Who was Jim Whitmore?

Faget: Jim Whitmore was someone that I met. I had seen him around even when I was a student in high school. He was always this guy standing there sort of observing, not participating as much as observing. At one point, Jean said, "You know Jim Whitmore is a really—,"—I didn't know who he was when he brought him up—"a very good photographer and he does great work."

So when I met him, I was like, "I think I know you. Weren't you the guy at the Jerusalem Temple that was always standing on the side looking at us pretty girls?" [laughs] And he was. So we became very close friends, he, his wife, and his children. We were all part of the clan, and he did a number of photo shoots for me too. It was all this kind of a tribe. We had a tribe.

Q: Were your interactions usually related to artwork, or did you go out carousing together or anything?

Faget: Oh, we did everything. [laughter] We went to the beach together. We went out together. We had parties together. We worked together. So it was like that. If we'd been in New York, maybe it would have been like part of Andy Warhol's scene or something. We weren't quite that

avant-garde, but we were pretty out there. Some of us, like my friend Donna Newton [phonetic], who I mentioned—that's whose sister just died yesterday—she and a next-door neighbor played guitar. I mean, it was just that scene. It wasn't a strict line of what was work and what was play.

Q: Who designed your logo?

Faget: Franklin, yes.

Q: Was there a story behind that?

Faget: Well, there are stories about it, but he just took my initials—Franklin was multi-talented. He was excellent at graphic design, as well as a draftsman. He drew like an angel, unbelievable, and loved it. He just loved to draw. The detail was amazing what he could do with a pencil or a pen. So he used to do any graphic work that I needed. Jean would do other things, but Franklin was—Franklin had impeccable taste and extreme skill. He was a *bon vivant*, loved to cook, so a lot of the parties were about Franklin cooking. It was a fun time. It was a crazy time.

Q: How long did that last?

Faget: [laughs] Well, it lasted quite a while. At one point, Jim—Jim was a writer as well as photographer. At one point, it was like I had to kind of draw the line between dropping by to see what I was doing and work, because I couldn't work. I'm not a multitasker. I have to concentrate on one thing at a time.

So, what was the question?

Q: How long did this social circle last?

Faget: It lasted for a long time, but for me I kind of limited it, because I couldn't work and play. I had to work and then play.

Q: Are Franklin and Jean and Jim still alive?

Faget: No. Jean is alive, but Franklin died two years ago, I believe, and Jim died about five years ago, I think.

Q: What is Jean doing now?

Faget: He's doing portrait work. Yes, he had a show at the Ogden, it'll be two years ago January, I think, or maybe three. I can't remember. But he does portraits, drawings, and paintings. He did a drawing of me while I was still married. I was pregnant with Jacqueline, and it's a beautiful drawing. He's very, very good. The show, you didn't see that show?

Q: No.

Faget: You know the series that the Ogden is doing on New Orleans Masters or whatever they call it?

Q: Yes.

Faget: Yes, and Franklin—I don't know what I was saying.

Q: Describe the ads that you had in *Figaro*.

Faget: Well, the ads I had in *Figaro*, it'd be easier to show them to you. They were like cartoons that Franklin did and one was a drawing of a—very cartoon-like drawing, of a snail on a silk cord, because my early jewelry was really open-ended. It was, like, there were objects that had holes in them, so you could string a chain or a cord, and so you could, like, almost make your own way of wearing it, and I wanted it to be that way, because the idea was that I wanted to place these designs at the disposal of the wearer, and the wearer would then come into the creative process and wear it in a certain way. Of course, a ring is a ring, although I had started—I think, I was the first one I've seen that started with stacking rings, so that one small ring can be made one big, bold ring by wearing three or four of them. That was the idea, and then I did the same thing with necklaces, a pendant—and I was talking about the snail. This is an example. It was a snail that could be worn in multiples.

So that whole concept of multiples, I think, I always said, you know, I think it was because when I was a child, I never had an add-a-pearl necklace. That was kind of a rage, but I never got one. [laughs] My mother didn't give me one or my father and mother. So this was like a joke based on the idea of add-a-pearl, which was actually a pretty smart marketing idea

that once you sold a pearl to someone, that then they would come back and add one every year or every whenever, and so you would have that person involved with you for a series of purchases.

So I started doing these add-pieces, and Franklin thought they were funny, so he did one that—this is an example. It was a drawing, like a cartoon drawing, of a snail, very simple, and a cord and then another snail over here. It had a balloon coming out of it and it said, “Add-a-snail. Add a sterling silver snail,” and like the snail was talking. It kind of went with the sort of funky style of my logo, and it was slightly funky. Yes, it was funky, but charming.

Q: Did you target your advertisements to particular publications for any reason?

Faget: Well, price was always a reason, and so I advertised in the tabloids because they were less expensive, and the tabloids were a very creative medium. There was one called the *Vieux Carré Courier* and there was another one called *Figaro*, and I used to advertise in those two. Once in a while, I’d advertise in the *Times-Picayune*, but it was a little beyond my budget then.

Q: Who was Larry Merrigan?

Faget: Larry Merrigan was the president of the Bank of New Orleans. It was a fairly new bank. I don’t know what he had done before, but a friend of mine from college, whose name is Beau Redmond [phonetic], he was his vice president over commercial loans. Larry Merrigan was a high-spirited Irishman who liked me and liked what I was doing. In fact—what year was this? Maybe ’73. So they did a series of television ads based on small business loans, and I was a very small business loan. [laughs]

So, you know, my business development is also personal. There's a lot of stories, but I'll give them to you. I had an old boyfriend from when I was in college who worked for an agency, Schweigert Advertising [phonetic]. Larry Merrigan and the Bank of New Orleans was a client of this agency, and they wanted to do a series of television commercials to attract small business, so I was chosen as one of the commercials for my business because Henry knew what I was doing and kept up with me, and he thought it was very unique. They did one on me, one on an antique shop on Magazine Street—Magazine Street was very different then—and one on the Girl Scouts' cookies. So it was definitely small loans.

The creative man—Rusty Cantelli [phonetic] was his name—met me and I told my story to him, and he decided that the thing to do was to make a little capsule of when I was a child, when I was a student, and today. So he did a scene of a child and an older woman at a sewing table, and it was about—I remember he used the word “adumbration.” I'd never heard that word before. That it was an adumbration of whatever, things to come, because he thought that all of this was generating in the mind of this child that became an adult and a student and then, later, did this business based on her creative energy.

So it was a sixty-second television spot and they showed the first scene was—oh, and wait. I can't remember the name of the filmmaker who did it, really the best. There were two really great filmmakers that did commercials in New Orleans. Hobby Morrison was hired to do the film. So there was this set-up that was supposed to be my mother and me working on a dress design. They had looked at all the pictures of me, and this was a little girl with long braids. The second scene was me in the sculpture lab at Newcomb College, working on a piece of sculpture, and that was another young woman who had dark hair. I didn't think she looked very much like

me. Then the third scene was of me in that time, contemporaneous, in the workroom and in the shop.

It put my name on the map, really, and it was just one of those lucky things that has happened to me, being in the right place at the right time, knowing people. I was not a celebrity in any way; I was just someone who had good friends, I think, very good friends. So my sales, which had been just barely enough to keep going, all of a sudden spiked up and it was like, “Wow!” I understood the power of advertising, particularly the power of television images. They ran this for like two and a half years, I think.

Q: When was this? What year?

Faget: I would say it was probably '73 or '74.

Q: Was it done on all the networks or just—

Faget: Yes. Yes, I was the favorite. There were these three commercials: the Blackamoor shop on Magazine Street and the Girl Scouts—I think that was all—and me, but mine was kind of more—a little richer than the other two spots.

Q: Does it exist anywhere? Do you have a copy?

Faget: Oh, yes, you can see it, yes. [laughs]

Q: Is it something that's going to be in the exhibit, do you think?

Faget: I don't know. I'm hoping, because it was a linchpin in the early days because all of a sudden, people knew who I was. It was amazing, the change it made. People would recognize me and, of course, my sales were immediately in another category. It wasn't a huge amount of money; to me it was a huge amount of money.

Q: And you were still at the Riverbend, the Dublin Street place?

Faget. Yes.

Q: Describe the Riverbend fairs, the little fairs that you had outside of the—

Faget: I think that the idea probably came—I don't remember for sure. I think the idea for the fair, it was right around the same time as the Jazz Fest started, and I was an exhibitor in the Jazz—I was one of the first, you know, when they moved from Congo Square to the Fairgrounds. The first Jazz Fests were in Congo Square—I don't remember how many years that was—and I was still in the little tiny shop. I hadn't moved yet, so that would have been about 1972.

Quint Davis and another guy named Henry—and it's a German name, but I can't remember—they came to see me and they wanted to—well, now I'm talking about the Jazz Fest, but anyway. They wanted to subscribe me to exhibit in the Jazz Fest, and so I said it was a lot of money, but I decided to do it. I told them I wanted to design a t-shirt, so I did design the first

Jazz Fest t-shirt, and it had Fats Houston—it had the image from a photograph that Mike Smith had taken. Mike Smith was part of the group, too, another artist who, of course, you know. I don't know if anybody here knows that Mike Smith used to make sandals. [laughs] He was a natural hippie. Yes, he made sandals. I don't know where he sold them, at street fairs.

I did a lot of street fairs in the early days. I would do street fairs for the ACLU or there was place called the Warehouse. This was early, before I had a shop, actually. So the idea of the street fair on Dublin Street was something I was familiar with doing.

In the early days, there was a place called the Warehouse. It was one of the warehouses on Chapaoula Street. There was barely any electricity in there, but they would have events and then, later, concerts. The summer of, I think, maybe 1970, Grand Funk Railway was in there, and I took my kids to see them, with two babysitters because the crowds were amazing. I remember going outside. It was in early September. I remember going outside and it felt cold outside. The heat inside was like a broiler. [laughs]

So when I was on Dublin Street, I think it may have been promoted by the *Figaro*. I kind of think maybe it was. The editor of *Figaro* was Jim Glassman, who's gone on to be a big deal in the news media in Washington, I think; I'm not sure. Jim Glassman. There was so much talent in New Orleans at that time. There always is, but I was—Philip Carter was the owner of the *Vieux Carré Courier*, so they did a story on me. I didn't realize how fortunate I was to get all this press, but it was nice, and I was very naïve.

So there in Dublin Street I had a band and I had the shop open, and everybody on Dublin Street was part of the fair.

Q: Describe your involvement in Jazz Fest.

Faget: Okay. Well, as I said, I designed the t-shirt, and what I did was take this Mike Smith photograph of Fats Houston, who was leading—I don't know if it was the Young Tuxedos or it was one of the marching groups. So I took the image, and Franklin stylized it to be just a block print, and I designed the graphics and just said "New Orleans Jazz Fest." I used orange t-shirts because the garbagemen used to wear orange t-shirts. [laughs] So it was real simple, orange t-shirt with a red print of the Grand Marshal of Young Tuxedo. And we sold a lot of t-shirts, and I did that.

Jean also had a business that he did the sets for one or two Carnival balls. I think the Mistick Krewe was one of his accounts and maybe [unclear]; I can't remember. So he had a whole warehouse of theatrical props and paraphernalia, so he built a tent for me. It was not the Jazz Fest like it is today. Some people were set up like that, but I was set up with a tent, and it looked like an English garden tent. It was made out of gray and white awning stripes, and he made it so that you could walk in, so it was a little shop, and I brought my jewelry down there in the case.

The first case I had was—my father was a doctor and he had retired, and it was an antique instrument case, one of those steel cases with the glass sides, on legs, so it was, like, perfect. I'm very good at recycling things and finding—now they make those now, those cases. Anyway, so I had the case and I had my clothes. At that point, the clothes had gotten much to be much more everyday-type, and I was making stuff out of denim and out of canvas, because I didn't have any money to go shop fabrics in New York, so this was like—but it was hot, you know, denim. That was when denim and jeans were just really getting going, and people thought it was a trend. [laughs]

But I did, like, hats, I called them baby beach hats, and I did shorts that were like the shorts that the Indian policemen wear, the big, baggy shorts made out of canvas or denim. I did halters. I did all these kind of fun things to wear that were not as sort of upscale or precious as things I'd made earlier, because I had this shop. And I also made French schoolgirl dresses, so they were all made out of denim or canvas, and then I would do some prints too.

Herbert Halpern took me to New York once to shop—he's the owner of Promenade, that fabric store—to help me shop the fabric market. They were all, like, little cottons that reminded me of Depression prints that maybe I had had dresses made of in the late thirties. Who knows. But they were very charming. There was a book, and you could look in the book and pick the fabric you wanted, this style. That was the first shop. So I was on Dublin Street a long time.

I moved to the second shop, which was a two-story building that had actually had a bunch of hippies living in it. [laughs] It caught on fire and it was on a Saturday. I'll never forget that. The firemen put it out. Then a man I knew who refinished furniture bought it and was doing it up himself, and he sold it to me around the same time that I had—you know, all of these time sequences seemed like a long time to me back then, but they were really short and all kind of jammed together.

So I was already out of space. I had the jewelry collection and all these dresses that people could order in their own fabric, and I needed space. Oh, and the women sewing in the room. So he was doing that building over and he agreed to—I couldn't buy it because I didn't have the money, but he gave me a lease-purchase agreement that lasted about four years and then I had enough money to buy it.

Q: Where was this building?

Faget: Next door to where I was, the two-story building in 710. I was in 714 Dublin, which was a river shack double. One side was a craft shop called Alternatives, and my side was my workshop.

Tim Trapolin had done a mural on my half of the building as though you had put masking tape down the middle of the building, and the roof was at a pitch about this steep, and it was corrugated metal. He painted a French countryside on it. It was very fauve in color, bright colors, and had a river with cows and geese. We ignored all the structural elements of the building and just painted over everything as though it were flat. That was my idea. It was good.

Q: Are there going to be pictures of that in the exhibit?

Faget: Yes, we just have some little snapshots of the building. Actually, Tim listened to my idea and he said, "I'll do it!"

And I was like, "Okay, well—." He looked at it and he wasn't afraid. He borrowed some mountain-climbing equipment from Milton Scheuermann. You know who that is? He's a teacher in the architecture school, and he's the one that organized the Musica de Camera, the ancient-music group. I guess he did some mountain climbing because he had harnesses. That was quite something.

Q: You were describing the tent that you had at Jazz Fest. Was that when it was still at Congo Square or was it at the Fairgrounds?

Faget: No, that was the first year at the Fairgrounds.

Q: Describe that whole experience in the tent.

Faget: Well, it was just a lot of fun. Jazz Fest was very different then. It was much more local, and the attendance was, of course, nothing like it is now, but it was like a great, fun fair. The food was the same kind of food, but maybe not as many vendors. The other vendors, I don't remember anything specific, but there were a lot of craftspeople, pottery. I don't think there was any other jewelry, but maybe. I don't really recall. We did it two years. And so every night you would have to pack everything up and take it out. It was a lot of work.

Q: When did you expand beyond Dublin Street?

Faget: You mean sales-wise?

Q: Or just physical space like when did you open a store outside of that.

Faget: Well, I was in Dublin Street—I don't remember the date I gave it up. I just can't remember. I was there about thirty years, actually, and I gave up that shop because structurally it was failing. I donated it to the Preservation Resource Center because I knew that they would find someone to stabilize it and purchase it, and so they made the money from the sale of the building and I was able to preserve the building through them.

It was a barge-built building and, I mean, I literally used up that building. It had shifted, and so some of the barge boards were not even sitting on the sills. I remember when that was. That was in 1996 because I was doing over the house I lived in. No, that was even later, because the contractor, who was doing over the house I'm living in now, he went to look at it and he said, "This is falling down. It's dangerous." It was the month of October, and we were going to miss Christmas, so he said, "Well, I can put some structural—." So he really held the building up through Christmas until we could get through Christmas, because, of course, that's the best season sales-wise.

So he built studs, big support beams to hold the second floor up, but he told me he crawled under there and he said, "Mignon, there's nothing there. The barge boards are not even sitting on one side of the house." It had shifted and they weren't sitting on the sill. And he said, "All I can tell you is that the weather boards that are nailed to the outside are holding it up."

[laughs]

Anyway, everything was okay. We closed it and moved out. I think that was the transition to Magazine Street, and I believe I had Magazine Street already, yes.

Q: Was Magazine Street a shop or was it just your workplace? Has it always just been your workplace?

Faget: Well, I have two places on Magazine Street. All of the jewelry work, except for the foundry work, was done on the second floor of Dublin Street, 710. We really needed space badly, but I took a very long time to find a building that I thought was suitable and that I could afford. So this was before I gave up the building, before I found out that it was in such bad

shape. Okay. Looking for a building, I looked at buildings in Bywater, I looked at buildings all over the city. I didn't want to move to a metal panel building in Jefferson Parish, although that's what probably most people would have done, but I go to work every day and I didn't want to work in a metal panel building, even if it was on River Road. That would have been nice to look out of the window, but.

One day someone told me, "The Hibernia Bank is closing." It was this beautiful stone building on Magazine Street right across from the police station, at the corner of General Taylor—General Pershing. General Pershing. So I saw it and it was just someone on the street told me that, someone that had a shop in that block. So I started calling the bank and they wouldn't talk to me because they said they weren't ready. So they finally let me see it and it was in great shape. It was big. I mean, I was used to working in, oh, I don't know, maybe 1,000 square feet. It was 7,000 square feet and a stone building that needed some work, but it was not major structural work. So I was able to buy it for a very good price, amazing price. That was about 1997, I think.

Q: Had you had other shops before you bought that?

Faget: Yes. My first branch came about because Larry Merrigan—I would go see him every once and a while and show him my statements. One day I went to see him and it was like, "I just don't know." It just looked so bad.

He said, "Mignon, your sales are not good, but you have a lot of inventory. Why don't you have a sale."

And it was like, "Oh!" So I did. [laughs] It worked. So then I started this annual sale.

But the same man, Larry Merrigan, earlier than this, had said, “You know, I think you would do very well if you had more exposure. Have you thought about having your own boutique in another store?”

I said, “Oh, that’s a very interesting—.”

He said, “Let me call Leon Godchaux,” who was the owner. Was Godchaux's—it wasn’t open anymore when you came to New Orleans.

Q: I remember hearing about it, yes.

Faget: You remember. Okay. Well, so he called Mr. Godchaux and said, “You know, there’s this designer and I think it would be a very good thing in the store.”

So they wanted to do it, so, that was my first project with David Waggoner, who was my architect. My business life is very, very personal, so these people that do things to help me, professional people, become my close friends. I adore David. David was a very young architect at the time, and he designed a kiosk inside of Godchaux's Lakeside store. I mean, it was right on the main aisle and it was very, very, very charming. It had walls out of glass and cases, you know, the walls of glass where the cases for the jewelry display, and it was sort of like a little walk-in booth and a counter, of course. We did very, very well there.

Then they were opening a store in the new mall in Esplanade and so they wanted me to do another one in that store, and David designed another kiosk. But that’s another story. They were going bankrupt and did.

But after I did the store in Lakeside, Joe Canizaro started getting in touch with me because Canal Place was being built and he had the anchor store, Saks Fifth Avenue. So I was

like, “I don’t know. I don’t know if I can afford this.” We worked it out and he didn’t really finance it, but the bank did and I built a store. It’s a prime location. It’s very tiny. It’s about 750 square feet and it’s right on the corner across from Saks on the main floor of the mall. So that became my freestanding store that was not inside a larger store.

David Waggoner designed that store, and it has a lot of me in it because it’s in the postmodern style and he built a pediment around—it’s a corner, and the corner was clipped so that’s the entrance in this beautiful Greek key entrance. It’s a very tiny store, but very bold, and that’s David’s style, very elegant and very bold and simple. And he ran my name around the pediment in the tradition of classical architecture. Yes, David is very, very talented.

Q: What year was the kiosk at Godchaux’s?

Faget: The kiosk at Godchaux’s was—the first one would have probably been about 1980 or something like that.

Q: And the store at Canal Place, when did that—

Faget: That was built in 1984.

Q: Did you have a presence at the World’s Fair?

Faget: Yes, I did. Not in the Fairgrounds, but I called—by that time Bob Tannen had become a good friend of mine. I think we made friends—he and Jeanne Nathan, his wife—we made

friends about '79 or something like that. Yes, 1979. He was very involved in bringing the World's Fair to New Orleans and the whole redevelopment of the Warehouse District. He's a city planner. Do you know about who Bob Tanner is? You should. He's an artist. He's a Dada artist and he's also a city planner, and he has a degree in industrial design, I think from Pratt. Anyway, he's about my age, and they became very close friends, and they are very unusual people.

So through his—Jeanne worked for the World's Fair—what was his name? Heliner [phonetic], I think. I can't remember who the executive director was, his name. It wasn't Mark Hemminer [phonetic]; that was someone else. I can't remember his name. But they were here a whole year before it opened at least, and I started going down and meeting people.

Now, at this time and starting about 1973 or '74, someone came to work for me who was very, very important in my development. It was a woman named Charlotte Norman. She was someone that is definitely part of my history. She was my business manager for over thirty-five years, about thirty-five years, I would say. I think she came to work around 1973 or '74.

Actually, I had known her when I was a model at D.H. Holmes and she had worked for the Cotton Council, which is a trade organization for the cotton industry. I was Maid of Cotton for Louisiana. Charlotte was not there yet. Anyway, she used to travel with the Maid of Cotton. Do you know what the Maid of Cotton was? [laughs] It was an honorary title of the winner of a contest held at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. Any state that was a cotton-growing state would send a young girl to compete, and I was sent from Louisiana.

But anyway, so I met Charlotte. I had met Charlotte when I was a model at D.H. Holmes before she went to New York. So she had left New York and she'd come to New Orleans via Houston, I think. She worked with R_____ Brennan [phonetic] in Houston. She's a foodie. So

she came to work for me and got me going business-wise. She likes to tell the story that I had a file in my filing cabinet that was called “Everything Else.” [laughs] I know you think I’m really goofy. Charlotte was a godsend because she was tough, she was dedicated. She just became like a wife. She was single, with no children, and we became a good team. Nobody, nobody defied Charlotte. She was like like a policeman. [laughs] So she took the pressure off of me, and she was a natural manager.

Q: So your operation must be getting larger and larger.

Faget: Getting larger, yes, and she took over hiring people and—where were we in the story?
I’m trying to remember.

Q: 1984 World’s Fair.

Faget: So back then I’d say, “Come on, Charlotte, we’re going down to—.” They had an office down on Front Street, close to where the Convention Center is now, and I would go and talk to them and show them some ideas, and they were very interested. I designed the official plate and I designed a key. It was all whimsical, the plate. Well, the whole fair was whimsical.

The plate was—I’d never done a plate before. It was a plate with a rim border, sort of a traditional shape with a flat rim border, and I designed a frieze of shrimp and oysters and crabs swimming. So the rim was sort of gray-blue representing the water, and that was the theme of the fair, and this was what the water yields, the produce. In the center I put the World’s Fair logo, which was a circle with this symbol for water, and I put a pelican sitting on top of it. It

would do well now, I'm sure, with all the tragic stuff happening in the Gulf. So they gave me official status.

And the key was—I used the design of their gate that Charles Moore had done, and I made the key look like a modern house key. It was good. It'll be in the show. Judith liked it. And I did a set of crystal with a water pattern on it, simple. It was, like, back to my block print ideas. It was frosted, etched on glass. I still use the double Old Fashion glass. We still sell them.

But it had the language of the fair at the bottom. I did a champagne cooler, a plate. So we marketed it ourselves because they didn't want to market it. So it was a good thing, because I probably would have never been paid. They didn't honor their contracts because they had no money. They went bankrupt.

So I sold them—I marketed them myself through a mailer that I made, and you could order either the glasses or the wine cooler or the plate. We sold a lot of it. I can't remember how I marketed the key. Yes, it was all marketed through a print piece that I did, a color print piece.

Q: After Canal Place opened, how many other stores did you open up?

Faget: Well, at the time that Godchaux's shut down, I went to see the president of D.H. Holmes. They were still operating. I talked to them about this arrangement and they put me in their store. It was a very simple kind of installation. They didn't build a kiosk; they just gave me an island in the jewelry area. So we sold—we did very, very well, and then they sold the business to Dillard's. When they sold the business, Dillard's at that time was a very rubber stamp kind of operation; what they had in one store, they had in every store. The merchandise manager, we

went to see her and she was not really interested. She saw this as very local and didn't want to, didn't think it was right.

So I opened up my own store. That was my first store in Lakeside shopping mall, and we recycled the piece that I had designed, rather than David Waggoner had designed for the new Godchaux store that opened and stayed open and closed within a year. So it was a freestanding kiosk that we—I don't know, we took it apart and, you know, I've always been that way, reinvent something and use it in another other way. I think I get that from my mother and from being born right after the Depression. [laughs]

So it fit really nicely and David designed this new store using elements from the kiosk that he had designed for Godchaux's, which was like an octagonal-shaped piece that had columns with a frieze around the top. It was a little—really clear with the name. It looked like the store in Canal Place, but it was a freestanding piece. So that became the new store, and we were there until our lease ran out, and we wanted more space, so we moved to another spot in the mall much, much bigger. That's where we are now, and David Waggoner designed that store.

Q: How many stores do you have now?

Faget: I have four.

Q: Following Katrina, did you think about closing them down, any of them?

Faget: I don't think that way. [laughs] I felt like there must be a way. Fortunately, I had attended—at that time, Mitch Landrieu was lieutenant governor, and he had started an annual

symposium to discuss—it was very large. It was in one of the ballrooms, I think, at the Sheridan, maybe. He was trying to generate interest coming from the Governor’s Office, in turning the cultural environment into an economic engine, so he called it the Louisiana Cultural Economy Initiative. He had a symposium.

The first year I went and the second year, and there were people from all over. There were people from different places in the U.S. that had done that kind of thing in a city that had a good cultural basis. When I mean “basis,” I mean a culture that is not imposed upon a city like a place like Houston, but a place like Detroit or—I don’t remember where the other places were, but they were places that had a culture that was built into the culture of the city but that was waiting for something to pull them together. So there were a lot of speakers. It was an all-day symposium, and it was the weekend of Katrina. It was that Friday.

So when Katrina hit, I was kind of wondering what New Orleans was going to be and what everyone was going to do, and what I, in particular, was going to do. My first effort was to get in touch with everybody who worked for me and let them know that the building on Magazine Street, where the factory was, was fine, I was fine, that the stores were fine, although they needed some work so that we would get back to work as soon as we could.

Then I called the Lieutenant Governor’s Office and spoke to someone who was interested in listening to this idea I had of what I could do to help, and what I could do to help that would also help my business and the people that worked for me to get back to work. So it was just one of those moments that when you’re backed against the wall, my creative juices were swimming.

I was talking to Jeanne Nathan on the phone because she was involved with that economic engine idea. I did a fleur-de-lis. Fortunately, I had a lot of fleurs-de-lis that I had already done because I’d been asked to do pieces. I developed a whole collection, not just

jewelry, but also glasses and home products like linens. I got my model, the person that does my models, on the phone and we designed one that would sell very inexpensively, that could be produced by a different technique, and could be sold in a non-precious metal. We did some that were bronze doré, which is a non-precious metal, plated with twenty-four-carat gold, and it was on a ribbon. It was a little pin. We called it the “Rebirth Pin” and it sold for twelve dollars. And we did one in sterling that sold for twenty dollars.

The first store we opened was Magazine Street. I was in South Carolina, where I have a house. That’s another story. The shop, my marketing person was Virginia Saussy [phonetic] and she said, “We’re going to open the store on Magazine Street.”

I said, “Virginia, nobody is going to want to buy jewelry.” You know, the city was full of National Guard people and they were all on Magazine Street. So she opened the store and people started coming in with bags of disgusting jewelry that had been sitting in floodwater, so we had all this work coming in of restoring people’s jewelry. So we brought people back in as we could find them.

My business manager at that time was a young man I had just hired a year before, thank god. He was my savior. He had an M.B.A. from Tulane Business School and we were in touch every day, and he was kind of trying to keep in touch with everyone.

So people were buying these little fleurs-de-lis. Everyone wanted a fleur-de-lis because it became like a badge of honor. We sold so many, I made a pledge to the Louisiana Cultural Economy Initiative, that then became a foundation, a real foundation and Scott Hutcheson was the one in charge of it. That was a little later, but in a year’s time—less than a year, we had raised an amazing amount of money. I donated, all told, a little over \$150,000 to the Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation, all through the sale of fleurs-de-lis. [laughs] It truly amazed me,

and I'm very happy to say that. It was—I don't know, it just galvanized my dedication to things about Louisiana, which I had been doing, of course.

I did a collection for the Aquarium as well, earlier, and reinvented that now to raise money. I'm working with the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and we're raising money through the reinvention of the fish I did for the opening of the Aquarium. We put them on black ribbons, the way I'd done with the Rebirth ribbon, but I called the collection "In Mourning," in the tradition of mourning jewelry. Have you ever seen the Louisiana State Museum's collection of mourning jewelry?

Q: No.

Faget: Oh, it's amazing.

Q: We have some pieces here.

Faget: Oh, you have some pieces here? Of course you do, made from hair. Yes. These weren't made from hair, but it has a black ribbon.

So that's my Katrina story. This was all a big surprise and we just rallied in. I came home about the third week of October, and the shop had been opened for a short time and sales were starting to happen. No one else was doing fleurs-de-lis. I was the only one. [laughs]

[End of June 14, 2010 interview]